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Avoiding Risk, Protecting the "Vulnerable": A Story of Performative Ethics and Community Research Relationships

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Article abstract

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Abstract In February 2019, OUTSaskatoon, a 2SLGBTQ+ resource centre in Saskatoon, SK, received 1.1 M in federal funds to support a five-year project set to intervene in the instances and societal perpetuation of gender-based violence toward the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The project involved partnerships between OUTSaskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan, including a comprehensive research and evaluation stream to accompany the delivery of front-line services and educational activities. During the project's application to the University's Research Ethics Board (REB), members of the ethics review committee expressed heightened levels of fear and discomfort not only with the subject-matter, but with the role (and centrality) of the community organization within the research process. The documented experience explores pressing barriers to effective and ethical community-university research partnerships. To this end, the authors explore their communications with the REB alongside the themes of "vulnerability," "risk-aversion," and more broadly regarding the timelines of community work versus university processes. Together these themes maintain a culture of academic exceptionalism that causes significant barriers to the development of reciprocal partnerships between community partners and universities. In this case, the outcome was hopeful, as a formal complaint to the REB received a documented apology. In documenting this specific, though not unique, experience, we aim to highlight the possibilities for leaning in and building ethical space between and through community and academic environments to foreground both needed critique and collaborative pathways forward.

KeyWords Research Ethics Board, community-based research, non-profit organizations, ethics, risk, vulnerability

AH: I receive an email from my University's Research Ethics Board (REB) requesting that I attend a full board review meeting of a community-based research project I was working on with a local 2SLGBTQ+ organization. I was nervous. Although I had been through the ethics process before, this was my first time addressing the full review board. Neither of my previous projects had sparked any ethical concerns, including a project on queer youth homelessness with the same agency, nor my Masters' thesis research looking at undergraduate student experiences of shame in university. Both

of these passed through with only minor grammatical corrections, even though the latter project resulted in participants coming forward and disclosing experiences of sexual violence and bullying. The ethics application before the board was the largest research initiative I had ever been a part of. It was the culmination of several years of working closely with OUTSaskatoon, my own graduate research interests, and my personal experience as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The importance of this work, and the pressure of these relationships, weighed on my shoulders.

I arrived at the meeting and was invited into the room where I sat down across from eight faculty members and a community representative. We were offered beverages and then we began. Within the first few exchanges, it was clear that I was on trial for future harms I had no intention of committing. More painful, however, was the combination of paternalism, discrimination, and unease expressed by the members of the REB. I was struck by the reactions of a board intended to serve as the ethical safeguard for our institution as they proceeded to question my work, the potential research participants, and the partner organization.

I left the meeting feeling confused, as though I had just experienced a hazing ritual, and in the following days I received eight and half pages of follow-up questions which included, among many other concerning items, problematic prejudicial remarks regarding the 2SLGBTQ+ community and requests to distance the community organization from the research activities. The process delayed the project considerably and redirected research efforts away from the community towards academia. This interaction sparked conversations about ethics, care, power, and vulnerability. I always thought that the REB existed as a collaborative body meant to minimize harm in its support of good and ethical research. Given what I experienced, I wasn't sure anymore. How was it that my training around community-based research models was so different from what the REB understood? Why did I feel like I was letting my community down?

In February of 2019, OUTSaskatoon, a trans, Two Spirit, and queer community centre in Saskatoon, SK, received 1.1 M from the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) and the Public Health Association of Canada (PHAC) to support a five-year project designed to intervene in both interpersonal instances and societal perpetuation of gender-based violence toward the 2SLGBTQ+ community (see Olsen, 2019). Upon obtaining the funding, a partnership was struck between OUTSaskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan, which included a comprehensive research and evaluation stream to accompany the delivery of front-line services and educational activities. Neither WAGE nor PHAC constitute federal research bodies, and so academic rigour was not required for the project's deliverables. However, given the projected scope and the value of the research, OUTSaskatoon determined that it was important to conduct the grant in alignment with community-based participatory research practices and guidelines, including applying to the University's Research Ethics Board (REB), and being able to publish and present on our findings.

We submitted an application to the REB entitled "A Gender Based Violence Needs Assessment in LGBTQ2+ Populations," which identified a shared governance model between OUTSaskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan. As the opening vignette indicates, upon submission to the REB, members of the ethics review committee expressed high levels of discomfort with the project, largely in relation to two different areas. The first was in regard to the subject-matter: research involving members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community who had experienced gender-based violence. The second area of concern was regarding the role of the community organization within the research process, as REB members considered them to be too involved in the design and execution of the project. In the time that has passed since the ethics review, the research team has spent a great deal of time ruminating over these areas of discomfort, both of which reveal significant areas of concern not only in relation to the experience recounted here, but with the gatekeeping role that ethics boards play in setting the terms for community-based research.

This paper discusses this experience in detail, as it tells a particular story about the insulation of academic environments and the fact that there are pressing barriers to effective and *ethical* community-university partnerships. While we focus on this specific case, we comment on a larger narrative that is consistent within similar accounts of experiences with REBs across Canada, whereby many scholars have experienced unnecessary delays, inappropriate questioning, and negative evaluations of engaged community partners when engaging with their institutional ethics boards in good faith (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014; Small et al., 2014; Travers et al., 2013; Wood, 2017).

This story is told from the perspective of two queer community-based researchers and scholars operating within incongruous systems. At the time of the experience, one author was the Executive Director of OUTSaskatoon, while the other was a graduate student who had been working in a research capacity with OUTSaskatoon for two years prior to the project's onset. With these relationships and experiences in hand, we highlight and develop three areas of interest: 1) the landscape of community research as it intersects with narratives of vulnerability and risk; 2) the competing timelines of community organizations and university systems and the impact this has on the research relationship; and 3) the hierarchical power dynamics that continue to devalue community leadership and knowledge within research relationships. Through these discussions we demonstrate that the prevalence and impacts of a risk-aversion and risk-mitigation model, in the landscape of community-based research, maintains a culture of academic exceptionalism (Burris & Davis, 2009; Fiske, 2009). By contrast, community-based participatory research methods, such as ours, operate to facilitate social justice efforts and to amplify the agency and expertise of the involved communities (Flicker et al., 2007; Kwan & Walsh, 2018).

In the case recounted here, we identify several key concerns surrounding the ethics review process; however, more importantly, we identify the ways in which any intended relationship between community and academe faces considerable barriers to reciprocal engagement, which are reinforced by the policies and procedures of university research ethics boards, but which are also embedded in divergent understandings of *ethics, vulnerability,* and even *temporality.*

Within the landscape of community-based research, these concerns are not *new.* Twenty years ago, Van den Hoonaard's collection *Walking the tightrope: Ethical issues for qualitative researchers* (2002) brought together 16 accounts of the barriers that social science researchers face in relation to overly quantitative and bio-medical ethics criteria. Clearly, such concerns remain relevant as researchers continue to face heavy-handed criteria surrounding the role of community organizations within the research process, and heightened risk-aversion in relation to various research topics and subjects. In our case, we filed a formal complaint in response to the ethics process; this complaint found resolve in a documented apology, which gestured toward future efforts to counteract the detrimental effects of the process. Moving forward, we are intent upon analyzing and assessing this experience with the aim of both tempering the hierarchical dynamic between community and academic researchers, and engendering ethical, reciprocal partnerships.

Positioning Community Research

Despite its vast landscape, community-based participatory research is still a relatively new field of practice and within theoretical audiences—including among feminist theorists, philosophers, and other critical theorists—it warrants nuanced explanation (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). Understanding prior research approaches is important in documenting the journey toward community-based participatory research. More traditional research has located itself within the realm of academe with the goal of knowledge production (Teufel-Shone, 2011); both laboratory and fieldwork research engage the realm of academic practice. Community-based research, however, takes place "in the thick of it," in settings where particular social and cultural phenomena occur *in situ*.

Practices of community-based research can be varied, ranging from conducting research on community, that is, "parachuting in" and engaging community superficially for the sole purpose of access to research participants, to substantive community engaged research, which provides community a place at the table where decisions are made. For the purpose of this article, we use community-based research (CBR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR), distinctly. The former term refers to research that has a goal of creating knowledge and advancing theory from within a community setting, while the latter focuses on engaging community throughout the research process while focusing on action-oriented outcomes (Teufel-Shone, 2011). Thus, despite their contextual differences, both laboratory and community-based research share a similar direction in that they are generally both driven by the goals, interests, and funding of the primary academic researcher and are focused on exploring phenomena. Understandably, research that takes place in a laboratory or other more academically-controlled settings may have differing aims than those of community engaged research.

Enter Community-Based Participatory Research. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation Community Health Scholars Program defines CBPR as a collaborative approach that begins with community strengths and concerns and seeks to translate knowledge into action, with a particular focus on social change (Griffith et al., 2009). Aiming for equitable participation,

CBPR recognizes the agency, positionality, and rights of individuals and communities engaged in various research processes. One of the most significant shifts from CBR to CBPR is recognition that community knowledge is of reciprocal value to that of academic research and so within such a landscape, the researcher's role shifts from the "objective" knowledge seeker to the facilitator or the convener of situated, deeply contextually relevant knowers and ways of knowing (Wood, 2017). The researcher works alongside community partners to support the knowledge building process, but refrains from determining the outcome and, where possible, from setting the objectives of the research initiative apart from community needs and concerns.

We revisit the basic tenets of community-based participatory research because it is widely endorsed within social sciences and humanities research environments, and because it shaped the methods of the project in question, especially its expectation that community partners lead the development of research questions and the process. That said, our experience with the REB demonstrated that they had a different understanding of what constitutes both CBR and CBPR. Consequently, we acknowledge the need for shared terminology and understandings around diverse research methods in efforts to assess and comment equitably on research initiatives.

Positioning Ethics Protocols

> *AH: During the meeting with the full ethics review board, one of the reviewers turned to me and asked how we were going to prevent "chicken hawking" following the focus groups. I balked. It was a term I had never heard. I had to ask for clarification, though I sensed the intent of the question. "Chicken hawking" is a discriminatory slang term that refers to instances where older gay men prey upon younger gay men. In a community research project aimed at recognizing and understanding instances of gender-based violence, it was telling that I was encountering precisely the types of homophobia in responses to our ethics application as were shared with us by survivors of gender-based violence. I educated the ethics review committee on the harm of this language, the experiences of survivors, and asked that the language not be used within the deliberations. The meeting and the term's usage carried on, and when I received the list of follow-up questions, I saw that my request had again been ignored. They wrote: "Please discuss the likelihood of violence (physical or otherwise) and predation (e.g., chicken hawking) during or after the focus group" (Behavioural Research Ethics Board, personal communication, April 30th, 2019). I was forced to reply both verbally and in writing to an antiquated stereotype that implied that the community organization was unable to protect "vulnerable" participants and that the 2SLGBTQ+ community was rife with predatory behaviours.*

Ethics are woven into every layer of our society. Should I buy a car that runs on gas or electricity? Do I stop to pick someone up on the highway? Should I grade student assignments without names or with identifying, contextual factors? Ethics constitute contested societal ideas about

how to live, including what we find acceptable or unacceptable, and what beliefs and values govern our behaviour. Ethics also offers a birds-eye view of who we are, how we are, and how we might behave (Wittgenstein, 1965).

American philosopher Simon Blackburn discusses ethics in terms of an ethical climate, referencing the ideological and epistemological norms that exist within a particular environment to influence the moral behaviours of a given community. For example, the ethical climate that enabled Hitler to come to power was characterized by beliefs in the purity of one race over another (Blackburn, 1999). Likewise, the explosion of the #MeToo movement on social media occurred in relation to a society whose ethical climate condones sexual violence and misogyny. Beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad, about who is valued and who is not, are all part of an ethical system. As each of these queries shift in relation to the surrounding cultural, social, and geographical environment, our very cultures and climates are created through their performative iterations.

Queries into that which is *ethical,* draw us in to relationships, social behaviours, cultural practices, and economic systems. One of the most compelling accounts of ethical practices of engagement from the last twenty years, particularly within a Canadian landscape, is Willie Ermine's concept of "ethical space." Speaking to the relationship between Indigenous law and Canadian legal systems, Ermine (2007) defines "ethics" as the "the capacity to know what harms or enhances the well-being of sentient creatures" (p. 195). The concept of ethical space, then, works to create sites of possibility and understanding between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. Such a contact zone is not without difficulty, however, as Ermine (2007) notes the ways in which the "ethical" can so easily be used as a mechanism for gatekeeping, racism, and paternalism. Such effects are borne not only from power imbalances, but from a false belief in any universal system of human knowledge and the centuries-old attribution of this universalism to Western ways of knowing. To this effect, Ermine (2007) writes:

> One of the festering irritants for Indigenous peoples, in their encounter with the West, is the brick wall of a deeply embedded belief and practice of Western universality. Central to the issue of universality is the dissemination of a singular world consciousness, a monoculture with a claim to one model of humanity and one model of society. (p. 198)

For decades, Indigenous communities have been studied by researchers from outside of their communities, not been involved in the research design and development, with limited or no access to research data and results, and perhaps most problematic of all, much research has been conducted without the intent to benefit Indigenous people, themselves. For example, between 1982 and 1985, Richard Ward took 833 vials of blood from a First Nations community for a Health Canada funded study about arthritis. After the blood was collected, Ward relocated from Canada to the United States and proceeded to use the blood samples in decades of research on HIV/AIDS, population genetics, and migration, none of which had originally been approved or agreed upon between Ward and the original First Nations community (Wiwchar, 2004).

Canada's development of the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP®) in 1998 was one among many attempts to balance research relationships more equitably and to right the wrongs committed against Indigenous peoples. OCAP® stands for ownership, control, access, and possession, and it is intended to support data sovereignty for Indigenous communities, serving as a key reference point when it comes to building relationships around both scientific and community-based research (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014).

2SLGBTQ+ communities share in some of these types of exceptionalist experiences because researchers have a history of studying 2SLGBTQ+ communities without ensuring community safety and guidance. Snyder (2011) conducted a trend analysis of medical publications that focused on LGBT people over a 57-year span, finding that nearly 15% of research focused on the pathologization of 2SLGTBQ+ people, rather than acceptance and acknowledgement. Just as the legacy of colonization has impacted relationships between universities and Indigenous communities, negative and pathologizing research on 2SLGBTQ+ communities has increased levels of distrust toward academia and bolstered homophobic/homonegative perspectives.

In Canada, university ethics boards operate under the guidance of the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics which brings together the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to support the Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethical conduct for research involving human participants (CIHR et al., 2019). The Tri-Council guidelines seek primarily to protect communities involved in research relationships and to guide REBs as they assess local proposals. Under the guidance of the Tri-Council Policy, Canadian University REBs are poised to prevent such risks to community, working to ensure that researchers are following best practices around community-based research, and that their research activities do not increase the social vulnerability of the research participants.

When it comes to the ethical climate of community-based participatory research, there is no shortage of literature regarding practice and process (Banks et al., 2013; Kwan & Walsh, 2018; Miller & Wertheimer, 2007; Wallerstein et al., 2019; Wood, 2017). Many have examined the limits and risks of consent, anonymity, ownership of data, self-determination of community partners, and the impacts on research participants. However, there is no escaping the structural power differences between community and academic partners, most notably owing to the fact that REBs are part of the institutional framework of universities and not formed as community-engaged entities, where, for knowledge to be credible it must first be approved via publication in the pages of a peer-reviewed academic journal. This sets up a gatekeeping mechanism, whereby community-based researchers and organizations are largely dependent upon academics to gain access to the tools, procedures, and evaluative import of the research ethics landscape.

Returning to Ermine's (2007) concept of ethical space, then, such a model offers opportunities for non-hierarchical and reciprocal engagement, rendered impossible if the dominant epistemological framework is never released. Put another way, community-based participatory research can never truly be reciprocal, nor evolve mutually if university

ethics boards fail to recognize the leadership and agency of community partners. In the case of the project at hand, such failure relied on an inability to view the 2SLGBTQ+ community itself as an agential research partner, just as past researchers too often refused to recognize Indigenous peoples as part of sovereign communities. Repeating old narratives, the research participants were cast as "marginalized," "at risk," and "vulnerable," language which operates as much to exclude as it does to protect minoritized communities.[1]

Ethics as Protecting the "Vulnerable"

One of the most striking outcomes of our engagement with the REB was around "vulnerability." Today you can barely open a newspaper without coming across the term "vulnerable populations." Like research environments, social service agencies, medical systems, even education systems are intent upon "protecting" the health and well-being of vulnerable populations (Miller & Wertheimer, 2007). Protections which, although they respond to socio-economic, institutional, and structural barriers, may in fact, restrict target populations from full access to services and supports. "Protection," then, stands in for paternalism, a practice and ideology that undergirds delimited terms of participation and thereby influences the prevailing perception and treatment of groups such as 2SLGBTQ+ or Indigenous communities (and of course the intersections between communities).

Framing populations as "vulnerable" can often be used synonymously with "weak" or "fragile," thus influencing beliefs that individuals, communities, and research participants, in our case, are unable to exercise their own agency and/or to make their own educated decisions about the research process. This was a key experience of our ethics review process as the reviewers asked questions about the safety and vulnerability of research participants, throughout. We recognize that the role of an REB is precisely to ensure that research participants are not made vulnerable by *the research process,* an aim with which we fully agree. However, communications from the REB extended well beyond this concern as they inquired:

> Given the ethical issues associated with this project (potential for distress, potential for violence, absolute need for confidentiality), it is unclear that focus groups are an appropriate means for data collection, as opposed to individual interviews, which offer much more security to the participants. Please discuss and provide a justification for the use of focus groups. (REB personal communication, April 30, 2019)

This statement raises concern that 2SLGBTQ+ project participants would be rendered "vulnerable" based on unverifiable mutual commitments to confidentiality, as if the stakes

1 This language was used in verbal communications, with the following written communication assuming increased risk for older adults and Two Spirit people: "You state that one focus group will be exclusive to LGBTQ2+ youth and one to service providers. Please clarify the population pools for the other focus groups (since you intend to have 4-6). For example, will there be a focus group for elderly LGBTQ2+ participants (i.e., 65+)? Please include in your description any further supports that will be in place to ensure the comfort and safety of these groups, if they carry any extra vulnerabilities (e.g., Two Spirits [sic])" (Behavioural Research Ethics Board, personal communication, April 30th, 2019).

would not be evident to everyone present within a focus group context, or that connecting with others targeted by GBV would not be healing, in and of itself. Expectations that queer, trans, and two spirit communities necessarily operate from socially targeted standpoints that lack safety, reproduce shaming stigmas, or even attract harm or damage from within and beyond the community, becomes unexamined justification for asserting a need for protection.

Another problematic framing included the assumption that the larger queer community was likely to perpetrate violence. Use of the term "chicken hawking" revealed expectations that older gay men are pedophiles who would lure young men out of the focus group for sexualization. Such a fear reveals decades-old prejudicial characterizations of the 2SLGBTQ+ community as dangerous, over-sexualized, and predatory, as well as a complete disregard for the expertise and competency of the community organization in providing professional and safe services. The REB also expressed great concern over the possibility of physical altercations occurring within the focus groups, which left the research team dumbfounded. Why would violent acts occur within a focus group? Was this question specific to the 2SLGBTQ+ community or based on prior experience with other communities of research? Without further context, we were unsure as to the intentions of the REB, but we surmise that this was not a question regularly asked of other research teams proposing to conduct focus groups.

Judith Butler's (2020) recent *The force of non-violence: An ethico-political bind* provides vital insight into characterizations of vulnerability, citing that shared (albeit unique) experiences of vulnerability offer the starting point for ethics to acknowledge the dangers of the discourse on "vulnerable populations" and its reinforcement of paternalism. Echoing our discussion above, Butler demonstrates that vulnerability narratives not only construe communities such as women, trans, and queer communities as victims, but cast the researcher, the writer, or even the aid organization as the subject intent upon relieving them of their vulnerability. In so doing, entire communities are detached from their own theories, networks, and power to wage resistances of their own. Butler (2020) writes: "Once 'the vulnerable' are constituted as such, are they understood to still maintain and exercise their own power? Or has all the power vanished from the situation of the vulnerable, resurfacing as the power of paternalistic care now obligated to intervene?" (p. 191).

One of the most compelling encounters with Butler's careful navigation of the landscape of vulnerability and precarity is in relation to the involvement of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in the study. We proposed a series of focus groups with 2SLGBTQ+ youth ages 13–17. OUTSaskatoon regularly works with this age group and was aware of their significant experiences of GBV within various systems (i.e., with education and healthcare experiences). OUTSaskatoon had its own internal policy and procedure that enabled youth in this age group to access professional counselling services in instances where requesting parental consent would have negative consequences. However, the REB was not comfortable with this strategy and requested parental consent, given the nature of research topic.

The REB's insistence on parental consent failed to take into account the precarious experiences and positions of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in relation to parents who are not affirming, or not aware of their 2SLGBTQ+ identity, at the same time that it refused 2SLGBTQ+ members' ability to speak up, to make decisions, and to recognize their own limits. To circumvent this

systemic barrier, the researchers developed a capacity to consent protocol (Nadin et al., 2018) that built upon OUTSaskatoon's internal practice. The capacity to consent protocol took the form of a phone interview with the youth where the researcher and the youth went through the consent form section by section. After each section, youth would repeat the meaning of the section (e.g., purpose, risks, benefits) in their own words and confirm their consent. This protocol was eventually accepted by the REB, signaling a positive engagement between the researchers and the REB and underscoring the value of this more nuanced commitment to inclusion, as our research activities revealed that parents often represented a barrier to youth participation in support programs aimed at experiences of gender and sexual diversities. Had we moved ahead with the limited consent process, these youth would have been excluded from our research activities and we would have missed many vitally relevant stories of gender-based violence that youth experience within their own homes.

Although we were able to make headway on this particular concern, it also demonstrates the force of vulnerability narratives and their relationships to perceived risk within the research project evaluation process. In this case, the REB was resistant to trusting the internal protocols of an organization that regularly serves and supports the population in question. As well, it aligned with other accounts of the ways in which research subjects are rarely recognized as agents of their own participation (Miller & Wertheimer, 2007). To this effect, our response to the REB sought to explain both the value of youth participation and some of the nuances surrounding the concept of "vulnerability":

> We believe that if youth are placed within systems (e.g., education) where they experience gender-based violence in their daily interactions, they have a stake in engaging in the conversations where the issue is being discussed. We believe that while this specific population is vulnerable, that should not be mistaken for being weak. As such we believe we have ensured the proper supports are in place for this specific population to participate in a meaningful and safe way. Not to provide agency to these voices we believe would be unethical and cause further harm to these youth who suffer in silence because no one will listen. (research team to REB, personal communication, June 2019)

Expanding the discussion from the issues surrounding informed consent to the protection and empowerment of members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community requires a shift in "object" or rather "subject" of research thinking, moving toward seeing the research participant as a creative contributor to the research process and its outcomes. Linking with contemporary social justice models of research, such a shift recognizes that structural inequity is itself too often an unacknowledged determinant of health and well-being. The academic institution itself serves as the structure which regulates, allows, and determines research portfolios and in doing so, determines community outcomes.

Ethics as Avoiding Risk

Any discussion of vulnerability leads into conversations about "at-risk" populations or the "avoidance of risk" in both human and institutional contexts. As it is used within REB contexts, the concept of "risk" is largely invoked in relation to the risk of the research in harming participants, a frame that is valuable given long histories of harmful and unethical research, as discussed above. At the same time, the entrenchment of this concept *reinforces* the "vulnerability" of the research participant.

Organizations such as OUTSaskatoon provide front-line services to a variety of community members on a daily basis, whether through counselling, peer support, crisis support, advocacy, or even providing access to food, bathrooms, and computers. From a community perspective, REBs are separated from community organizations by an emphasis on risk-aversion, which reveals limited experience in providing front-line services to so-called vulnerable populations. When used in such a context, "risk-aversion" reads as a liability issue: it is used to protect the university, not to protect the community. It reminds us that that there are great benefits to laboratory research environments where the research is controlled for mitigating factors and is protected from the messiness and unpredictability of direct socio-cultural influences. CBPR opens up a petri dish of inputs: participants of different ages and backgrounds, community partners that do not understand research protocols, community staff that know research participants outside of the research relationship, and many other relational overlaps which create "risk" after "risk" for the research institution. Returning to the case of youth involvement in research, if we had not pushed back, the intersecting "vulnerability" factors of age, sexuality, gender, and disclosure would have led to their exclusion.

Timelines

> *AH: It only took two weeks for the review committee to review our application and when we met face-to-face, I spent an hour answering question after question about the research plan. However, as the end of the hour approached, the chair of the ethics committee halted the process, indicating that we had run out of time. We were informed that the rest of the questions would be shared through email, and we later received an additional eight and half pages of questions from the board.*
>
> *Reflecting on both the questions and the experience of meeting with the ethics board, the research team and the community agency had an important decision to make regarding steps forward. Do we water down our research design to appease the ethics board or do we disagree and contest their decisions, thus inviting further project delays? The community agency was ready to start working, the funder was keen to obtain progress reports, and the ethics board moved slowly. We knew that time was not on our side for this one, that it would be faster to acquiesce than it would be to stay true to our research plan, one that had been designed by and for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.*

It may seem strange to think about community-university engagement through a temporal lens, but it is likely less strange to think about power dynamics using a temporal lens. *Time* easily relates to privilege, access, and power. The one that controls the timeline controls the actions of others, the latecomer to a meeting disrupts all others—and likewise can be shamed and exiled for failing to meet a societal norm. In the experience recounted here, it was clear from the very beginning that the community timeline was easily three spins ahead of the university's and that this was a point of contention. Universities operate according to the timelines of the school year. September's rush of new classes serves as the starting point for many research projects and initiatives. The term calms down in October, only to speed up again in November, rendering itself entirely off-limits in December as students and instructors are caught up in the bustle of final assignments, exams, and grant and job application deadlines. The cycle repeats in the second term before sliding into the more languid summer months. Figure one demonstrates the steady linear timelines of the fall and winter terms in dark green, while the shorter, light-green sections represent the spring and summer terms. Time is broken into academic terms, but marches ever forward.

Figure 1. **University Time**

In contrast, most non-profit organizations operate according to the cycle of the fiscal year—April to March. Grants are due year-round, but most require completion, or some stage of reporting following the fiscal year-end, with financial and project updates mid-way through the year. Community timelines are tight and projects move quickly as a grant could be received in April for a program implemented by June and completed by February. Often the final report and evaluation must be on the funder's desk before the next grant is due. Within the non-profit sector, there is no languid summer; September is no different from January, and delays mean that money does not flow.

The ethics application for the GBV Project was submitted to the University in March 2019 and although it went to full board review only two weeks later, several back-and-forth communications meant that the project took until July 2019 to receive full approval, a delay that interacted negatively with OUTSaskatoon's internal operations. OUTSaskatoon was not able to report on relevant research activities by the mid-term reporting period, turning a three-month ethics delay into a six-month project delay. As it played out further, the incongruent timelines resulted in delays in the release of additional grant funds for the project and further impacts on project delivery.

When it came to disparate timelines between the University and the community agency, the community researchers were profoundly aware of, and responsive to, these competing timelines in a way that the REB was not. In fact, many community researchers have indicated that *time*

and *timing* play a key role within any research project, particularly between community and university environments. In a survey of parties involved in community-based researcher efforts, Flicker and colleagues (2007) asked the question "If there was one thing you could change about [your last CBR] project, what would it be?" (p. 244). Respondents felt as though they had not planned enough time for relationship building, while also expressing disparate understandings of "time" and "timelines" as they operated between university and community partners. These timelines were impacted by funding and resource availability whereas comparatively university researchers are generally much more stably funded, with many opportunities for extension so that "money and time for academic partners is not an issue" (Flicker et al., 2007, p. 245). On the flipside, non-profit community partners are often engaged in front-line services that must respond directly and immediately to service users, leaving little time for (or prioritization of) research activities and tight turnarounds for grant delivery and reporting.

In the case of the project at hand, we were fortunate to be working within an existing and long-standing relationship between the community organization and the research partners, so *time* was on our side in terms of building relationships and trust. As well, the community organization held the research funds, not the University, further offsetting the historically problematic power-dynamics that exist when the university maintains control of the funds. That said, we undoubtedly felt the impacts of competing timelines, with impacts ranging from slight to extreme.

Figure 2. **University and Community Timelines**

Figure two layers the linear forward movement of the University with a ribbon of community time. It is clear that in addition to having the luxury of time and stable funding, university timelines follow a consistent rhythm, made stronger every year as it repeats patterns established many years previous and knows that it will continue along the same lines for years to come. In contrast, community time rarely has the privilege of falling into rhythm. Disruptions are common, crises are everyday occurrences, and as community needs never end, community work never pauses. Thus, community time loops and threads around the stalwart progression of the academic year. Though community-engaged service delivery undoubtedly has its own rhythms and patterns, these differ drastically from the steady September to August rhythm of the University, outlined above.

In a discussion of the push and pull of various timelines on feminist initiatives in the present, Loewen Walker (2022) demonstrates that our anticipation of future outcomes, whether positive or negative, reinforce progress narratives. We assume that all movement is toward a safer, better future and that we must take direct steps in the present in order to achieve said outcomes. Of course, we all hope for a future that is "better" than the past, but the ensuing anticipatory regime shuts down moments of possibility and engagement that are otherwise invisible within such progress-oriented timelines (Loewen Walker, 2022). Regarding our encounter with the University REB, the anticipatory regime draws a causal relationship between vulnerability and liability, or fragility and risk, whereby vulnerable populations are assumed to increase the risk of liability. This assumed causality requires present actions that will avoid the anticipated future instead of starting from a present moment that looks to the strengths and expertise of the community partner, the research team, and even the research participants.

Caught between two divergent timelines, the research project was unable to create momentum of its own and the impacts of the University's linear timeline heightened the performative effects of anticipation in creating the vision of the world assumed to lie ahead. To reimagine that narrative, we may want to start from a strengths-based position, instead of one with frames of risk and vulnerability. In so doing, we may be able to lean in to an ethical space of engagement as a mechanism to ensure the safety and agency of those participating in the research. We may be able to side-step the propulsive force of linearity to recognize that the evolving ribbon of community time is precisely what opens us up to what Ermine (2007) calls "the electrifying nature of that area between entities" (p. 194). It is in spaces and efforts toward engagement that we can open sites of collaborative community-led research. The question, however, is can we overcome the power imbalances that plague community-university partnerships?

Where Exceptionalism Lingers, Reciprocity and Collaboration Flounder

Universities across Canada have made grand statements about the value of community engagement and, in fact, even the University of Saskatchewan's own Strategic Research Plan includes dedicated guideposts aimed at increasing community impact and collaboration efforts when it comes to research platforms. That plan states, "we will be better community partners, deepening connections that fuel creativity, expand horizons and ensure that the world benefits from our work" (University of Saskatchewan, 2018, p. 7).

It is reasonable to expect that our REB would be made up of individuals and faculty intending to support capacity for such engagement. That said, REB boards are often not fully prepared for the range of emerging methods, participatory action research, patient-oriented research, and evaluation activities. Though it is impossible for one board to have all of the necessary knowledge for the assorted topics, populations, and methodologies presented, individual members are selected based on relevant and applicable expertise and receive training on the Tri-Council ethics guidelines. Even though ethics boards often strive for gender parity, include community representatives, and seek members with diverse and relevant expertise, social justice efforts that align with CBPR methods still appear to push REBs outside their

comfort zones and expertise (Flicker et al., 2007; Kwan & Walsh, 2018). Dominant ideological and epistemological framings still so often insert hierarchies into the research relationship making it difficult to ignore both the language and impact of "risk."

As shown by University of Saskatchewan policies for conducting research on human subjects, concern for welfare includes "[minimizing] foreseeable risks to those participants and their communities, and [informing] research participants of those risks" (University of Saskatchewan, 2013). This is a worthy aim; however, when it comes to deciding what constitutes safe and acceptable research, including what minimizes risk and what exacerbates vulnerability, community partners do not have a seat at the decision-making table, while REBs hold the authority to refuse various methods at the expense of the voices and needs of specific communities (Wallerstein et al., 2019).

Our experience throughout this process repeatedly demonstrated that the REB endorsed the moral superiority of the academic research process, a process whereby the researcher determines the scope of the project, identifies the objectives, and ensures that the "community" does not "skew" the data or affect the approved research methodologies. In addition to making this clear in the verbal review, their follow-up questions amplified this standpoint as they asked the following:

> 1. Please address whether it is appropriate for OUTSaskatoon to provide support to participants, since they are the funder of this project. Instead, please consider providing professional support that is independent of OUTSaskatoon.
> 2. In a suggestion to move the research activities away from OUTSaskatoon: "Given the possibility that participants' perpetrator may interact within OUTSaskatoon's spaces, please hold the focus groups away from OUTSaskatoon, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants." (REB, personal communication, April 30, 2019)

Regarding the first request, the REB mistakenly attributes OUTSaskatoon as the funder, when in fact the project was funded federally. The query lands uncomfortably considering that most of the time it is the academic researcher and, therefore, the university that holds the funds. Given that REBs have little issue with holding research activities on campus, our assessment of this comment was that they did not trust OUTSaskatoon to provide fair and "unbiased" support to research participants.

This assessment was amplified by comments that OUTSaskatoon should not be providing support services to research participants following and during the interviews and focus groups. In a city of just under 300,000 people, with one primary 2SLGBTQ+ community centre that serves as a provincial expert in 2SLGBTQ-specific counselling, education, youth housing, support services, and referrals, this comment entirely underestimates OUTSaskatoon's far-reaching expertise and leading national work on 2SLGBTQ+ social issues (i.e., 2SLGBTQ youth homelessness) (OUTSaskatoon 2019; Pillar, 2019; Short, 2020). Furthermore, given

that our project specifically focused on the ways that homophobia and transphobia operate as largely unacknowledged arms of gender-based violence, it was ill-conceived to assume that we should look elsewhere for "professional support." This request was made even more absurd given the fact that OUTSaskatoon regularly advises and educates other counsellors and healthcare providers on how to provide comprehensive and safe services to 2SLGBTQ+ people. The second comment revisits the prejudice of earlier questions about "chicken-hawking" in its assumption that the larger 2SLGBTQ+ community is rife with predators and that the so-called "perpetrators" of gender-based violence against 2SLGBTQ+ people are loitering about and otherwise engaged in activities at the centre. By seemingly assuming that OUTSaskatoon is neither aware nor capable of ensuring the safety of all who engage in support and professional services, the comment reinforces the REB's failure to recognize OUTSaskatoon as a legitimate and expert service provider.

It bears mentioning that the crucial nuance around GBV that the research ultimately revealed was that its impact on 2SLGBTQ+ communities is primarily by way of parents, educators, health care providers, and other individuals generally *outside* of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The REB's relentless efforts to frame the 2SLGBTQ+ community as a site of sexual violence and predation itself reminded us that although we have come a long way in terms of 2SLGBTQ+ acceptance and understanding, many still understand our community through these long-standing stigmas, whether overtly or not. Our responses to the REB firmly upheld the value of conducting research activities at OUTSaskatoon in order to connect participants with existing services as well as to ensure that we could promise a safe and 2SLGBTQ-affirming space to those engaged in the project.

This feedback from the REB, underlined continued distrust of community knowledge, and their own precarious knowledge around the practices and principles of CBPR (Travers et al., 2013). As a project entirely initiated by the community agency, it was disheartening to experience academic distrust of the organization's ability to play a leadership role in the research activities. This distrust exposed a continued reliance on a model whereby community-based research is still a top-down activity: a researcher develops a compelling hypothesis or research question then applies it to a community setting in order to test its validity.

Such views surfaced again when we supplied comment on the value that focus groups played in allowing for social sharing and connection, a process which research participants have since described as cathartic and healing (Morse, 2007; Moyle, 2002; Rossetto, 2014; Wilson, 2011). In our verbal exchange, the REB avowed that research is not therapeutic and should not be recognized as such; however, when we look at the changing landscape of community engagement with research, especially as it relates to diverse healing paradigms and worldviews, this traditional reliance on a western clinical model of therapy is clearly no longer the only valid option. CBPR's focus on social justice and empowerment undoubtedly muddies the waters of some research paradigms as social justice outcomes rely on the lived experiences of those most affected by unjust systems, while "empowerment" is the product of both individual change and social transformation. To draw a line in the sand around the experiences of participants in the research is to refuse to recognize the multiple experiences that already take place, as well as the

potential for much deeper and more collaborative experiences of community research to come. Again, Willie Ermine's ethical space reminds us that to know the "other" is to step into the ring of shared learning, and to thereby extend the horizons of relational possibility.

Conclusion: Building Ethical Spaces of Engagement

To the great credit of the University of Saskatchewan's REB, they issued a formal apology following our response to the written questions:

> The previous Notice of Ethical Review for this project included language that was not appropriate to a formal notice and indeed was offensive. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. The Behavioural Research Ethics Board recognizes its error and apologizes unreservedly for the use of this offensive and stigmatizing language. We have updated our processes to ensure that this does not happen again. (REB, personal communication, 27 June 2019)

The apology was well-received by the researchers/authors and community partners. Not only did it acknowledge the harm that was caused, but it also indicated that there are possibilities for future engagement and transformation regarding such dialogues. Although the path has been difficult for us, as researchers, authors, and members of the queer community, we are deeply invested in the collaborative contact zones between academic and community environments within which research ethics boards are one point among many other sites of potentially productive difficulty. We are also interested in further illustrating the key differences between community-based research and community-driven and/or community-led research, a category within which CBPR strives to be situated. The distinction between these various modes of framing and knowledge-building plays a key role in the levels of collaboration and reciprocity both needed and made possible within the community research landscape. In fact, it might be helpful to call such projects social innovation efforts, as they operate to further destabilize the potentially objectifying language that still informs academic conventions and to better situate the value of community and social impact that is so needed from our research efforts.

The other key narrative we sought to illustrate is the role of the anticipatory regime of risk aversion. An ethical framework based on reducing risk at the expense of listening to and engaging with complex and diverse individuals and communities, inevitably maintains a hierarchical relationship between "community partners" and "academic researchers." Such an approach ensures that community-based research is not necessarily to be about getting the most informed people around the table and trusting the collaborative skills of the team, but about reducing the presumed vulnerability of the research subject by working backward to remove perceived and/or actual elevated risk indicators, whether they are considered to arise from people, organizations, models, or methods. If we are to build ethical spaces of engagement we *must* focus less on the anticipated risk and more on the relationships, experiences, and knowledge systems we bring together as community representatives, researchers, research participants, and decision makers.

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